

# Augustus, the senate, and the city of Rome

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All over the world exhibitions and conferences have been celebrating the bimillennium of the death of the Emperor Augustus. But just how much of a revolutionary was Augustus? Amy Russell takes a close look at Augustan Rome and explains how at the same time nothing, and everything, changed.

*He legitimately boasted that he had inherited a city of brick but was leaving behind a city of marble.*

Suetonius, *Life of the Divine Augustus* 28

Augustus' boast to have rebuilt the city of Rome, Suetonius says, was justified – and Suetonius is correct. Plenty of the great monuments we can visit in Rome today came later, from Trajan's forum to the grand imperial complex on the Palatine, but Augustus was the man who first turned Rome into a monumental, marble city. In the year which marks the 2000th anniversary of Augustus' death, it is worth imagining how an elderly Roman in A.D. 14 might reflect back on how much his home town had changed during his or her lifetime.

## Augustus as first among equals

The physical city was not the only thing that had changed. If our elderly Roman was himself a member of the elite, a rich man and a member of the Senate, he would have been aware that his own relationship to the city was very different from that of his father's generation. In the Republican period, senators used the city of Rome as one of the playing fields for the fierce competition for political success and lasting glory which dominated their lives. Just as they competed with each other to give the best speeches, to win the greatest victories against Rome's enemies, or (most pointedly) in political elections, they also competed with each other to build the grandest new temples or civic buildings. In essence, the change Augustus brought was simple. He did not change the rules of the competition: he just won it.

Augustus' own autobiography, the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, or *Deeds of the Divine Augustus*, is full of the names of buildings and monuments he built or

refurbished. It lists a dizzying array of temples, porticoes, basilicas: the great Theatre of Marcellus, still standing today, is his work (in honour of his son-in-law) as are the massive new Forums of Augustus and of Caesar, which today can be seen on either side of the Via dei Fori Imperiali. The old Forum was not left out: someone standing in Rome's main square in the year A.D. 14 would have seen buildings built by Augustus on every side. Though each of these buildings was full of fascinating details and well worth exploring individually, the primary impression our imaginary viewer would have picked up from the over-all experience was not exactly subtle: Augustus was glorious, generous, and in total control.

## The city of Rome before Augustus

To understand change, it is important to consider what came before. Under the early Republic, Rome's temples and civic buildings had been built of local stone and decorated with terracotta, but even before Augustus this was changing. New wealth poured in from the conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean, and the cultural contacts the conquering generals had made on their travels meant that new architectural styles and dazzling new materials like Greek marble were beginning to appear in the second century B.C. All of this was done and paid for by individuals, mostly on their own initiative and with the sole goal of enhancing their own reputations.

Competition led to a flourishing culture of architectural innovation. Each patron wanted his building to stand out. In the Forum Boarium, now the Piazza della Bocca di Verità, two of these temples can still be seen. The patron of the first of the two, built to Hercules just before 100 B.C., chose to make a splash with an unusual round temple. It was constructed entirely in shining imported marble and decorated

with elaborate Corinthian capitals. About twenty years later, another prominent Roman chose to build his own temple nearby, dedicated to Portunus. Everything about the second temple was designed to provide a contrast with the first. Interestingly, the new patron did not choose to trump the older temple's luxurious materials and decoration with something yet more extravagant. Instead, cleverly, he used a restrained, minimalist approach. The temple he built had a more traditional rectangular shape, used local materials, and was decorated with the plainer Ionic order. It even faced directly away from its neighbour. In these examples, as in many others, competition between builders for viewers' attention resulted in the juxtaposition of eclectically different building types. The viewer was confronted with a huge range of architectural styles, and a city which had been developed piecemeal without much of a central guiding authority.

In the final years of the Republic, the outsize success of generals like Pompey and Caesar led to an intensification of competition, including in building. Pompey commissioned a theatre on the Campus Martius just outside the city which rose from the low plain to rival the height of the Capitoline hill. Caesar drew up plans including a brand new Forum. Tellingly, he also planned a theatre of his own, just as Pompey had done. His building programme may have been larger than any before, but it was designed in an atmosphere of contrast and competition with Pompey's.

## Augustus takes over

Once Augustus won the civil war, he gained so much power and prestige that no one could successfully compete with him. Few bothered to try. Suetonius in his *Life of the Divine Augustus* (ch. 29) says that Augustus himself tried to encourage other patrons to help with the project of beautifying the city. He names a few who did; but apart from Agrippa, Augustus' right-hand man and son-in-law, the names Suetonius mentions were mostly active at the very beginning of Augustus' reign. Later on, few could be found who were

willing to give the money to build in a city so totally dominated by Augustus.

It is not hard to see why contributing buildings to the city became less attractive to Romans outside the imperial family. One of the projects Suetonius mentions is the temple of Apollo built by Gaius Sosius. Sosius had won military victories in the east in the early 30s B.C., and had planned a temple to ensure that his achievements were not forgotten. But in the second half of the 30s civil war erupted, and Sosius picked the wrong side, fighting alongside Antony at the battle of Actium in 31. After they were defeated, Sosius was pardoned. His temple had been begun but not finished, and Sosius must have realized that it would no longer make sense as a grand monument to his own success. Instead, he decorated it with a frieze showing a triumphal procession with three sacrificial victims – a telling detail, since Sosius had only ever been awarded one triumph, but Augustus had three – and dedicated it on the 23rd of September, which happened to be Augustus' birthday. Sosius' temple, in the end, became a monument to the greater glory of Augustus.

### The senators and the city

How were the senators supposed to feel now that they were deprived of their opportunity to use building to advertise their personal glory? This was a question they faced in many areas of their lives. Rome's richest and most powerful men were used to being rulers of the world, engaged in constant competition with each other to get to the top of the pile, but secure in the knowledge that as a group they were firmly ensconced above everyone else. Now Augustus' power and prestige outshone them all.

Senators, for the most part, stopped building new monuments. But at the same time a new phenomenon emerged: the Senate, as a group, began to build. In the early years of Augustus' reign, they voted to build at least three arches in his honour – though the constantly changing political situation meant that only one or two of these were ever built. A few years later, in the year 13 B.C., they commissioned one of the most famous monuments which survives from the reign of Augustus or any other emperor: the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, or Altar of Augustan Peace.

The Altar is not huge, but its exquisite decoration marks it out as important. It consists of a decorated wall surrounding the altar proper, and stood just outside the city's boundary on the Campus Martius. Nowadays, it is enclosed by a museum just next to Augustus' mausoleum. Visitors are often struck by the panels by its two entrances, which depict scenes redolent with themes of the prosperity and peace

enjoyed by Rome under Augustus. Everything, as we should expect, testifies to Augustus' glory. Along the sides of the enclosure, however, is a different set of images. Here, men and women are shown walking together in a religious procession. Augustus is among them. Today he is easy to pick out (see p. 4), because he comes right at the end of one of the preserved slabs, and only has half a face. When the altar was intact, however, he would have appeared less as an all-powerful emperor than as a first among equals. In these friezes, individual glory – of Augustus or of any other patron – is played down. Instead, we see a group coming together to celebrate a ritual.

The Senate's new role as the joint patron of buildings in Rome was new and different. Before Augustus, it was a collection of competing individuals, in building as in everything else. Once Augustus decisively won the competition, one of the responses of the senators was to band together. They began to see themselves and to act as a group. It was only by putting aside their individual differences that they could even hope to begin to provide a counterweight to the unprecedented power of Augustus. Even then, of course, they had no chance of outweighing him: all their building projects are explicitly built in Augustus' honour.

For the Senate, building in honour of the emperor was not just an act of submission. Augustus needed them: with the illustrious Republican institution of the Senate behind him, he could make the claim that he respected Rome's traditions even as he radically reshaped them. Giving prestigious honours to Augustus was a way for the senators to emphasize their own importance and prestige, and to tell the world how they understood their relationship with him. Augustus was duly grateful: in his *Res Gestae*, he mentions the *Ara Pacis*, but rather than including it in the list of his own building projects he separates it and emphasizes the fact that the Senate built it for him. For our elderly senator in A.D. 14, the fact that the Roman cityscape now contained buildings he could feel proud of because of his membership of a group, rather than being entirely devoted to competition and one-upmanship, was a real change. He would never inscribe his name on a gigantic new temple, as his father or grandfather might have done, but he could imagine himself as one of the figures standing next to Augustus on the *Ara Pacis*, confident in his own importance to the regime.

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